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ABSTRACT

With the rise in popularity of teen romantic fiction, many teachers wonder about the nature of such books and whether they should be used in the reading program. Most of the teen romantic fiction is written to a well-defined formula, based on guidelines from the publishers and on high-interest low-vocabulary literature. Characteristics with the most appeal for students include simple and direct story line, a lot of action and dialogue, and tight writing with short, simple sentences. Female central characters involved with slightly older, handsome, sensitive boys, in familiar teen settings such as school, beaches, or fast-food restaurants are also features specific to romance series. Advertising campaigns for these books are targeted specifically for teenage girls, which accounts in part for their popularity. This popularity may also be a reaction to the so called "problem novel," or due to a desire to feel good and self-confidant about boy-girl relationships. Teen romances have been criticized as sexist and stereotypical, but many librarians support them as one component of a well-balanced reading program, and a stepping stone to books with a romantic element but with greater literary value. Research on reading interests indicates that romances are widely read and in great numbers, by junior and senior high school students. Students who read teen romances, however, indicated that they also read other kinds of literature; the paper concludes that teachers may safely and enjoyably include them in their reading programs. (HTH)

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ENTICING READERS: THE TEEN ROMANCE CRAZE

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Every reading teacher knows the "publishing phenomenon of the decade" (Lanes, 1982) has arrived. A look at check-out cards, a glance at what students are carrying, an interest inventory all reveal the same thing: the huge popularity of contemporary teenage romance novels. Since Scholastic first published Wildfire Romances in 1980, fourteen publishers are now producing nineteen romance series for girls between the ages of 8 to 18 years old. The industry has earned over $20 million (Fredette, 1984) in just four years. Girls are buying and reading with a passion not seen since the 1950s and 1960s when teen romances were last popular.

Because of the rapid rise of teen romantic fiction, many teachers have been caught unprepared. What exactly is a teen romantic novel? Why are they so popular? Should I allow them in my reading program? What does the research reveal? This article will provide answers to these questions as well as publisher information.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A TEEN ROMANTIC NOVEL?

In 1979 Scholastic noticed that the original paperback romances included in their Teenage Book Club (TAB) were doing extremely well. They decided to add a romance line and extend it to the bookstore market. In just two years, Wildfire Romances sold over two million copies with 24 titles. Scholastic then decided to add two new series, Wishing Star and Windswept. The enormous success of category teen romance novels lured six other companies into the competition (Parrish, 1983). Currently seven others have joined, making the total of fourteen, with more planned for 1984. Since 1983 several romance lines have been published for specialized audiences. Bethany House has two romance lines which contain a main Christian lesson as well as romance and mystery. Warner Books (Two by Two Romances) present both the boy's and the girl's point of view. Heart Quest Books are fantasy adventure-romance with medieval settings. Archway Paperbacks and Wanderer Books have series

with multiple plots and multiple endings. In these the reader gets to choose where the heroine will work, which boy she'll date, and other choices, most of a romantic nature. The story advances in tree-like fashion, branches shooting off in several directions, culminating in all possible endings. A list of current publishers with an explanation of their series, prices, and age recommendations is included at the end of this article.

Most of the teen romantic fiction is written to a well-defined formula. Writers are given guidelines from the publishers. Part of the formula came from the lessons learned in the success of high interest, low vocabulary literature. A survey of 24 publishers suggested the following twelve characteristics have the most appeal for students (Dubrovin, 1979):

1. fast-paced opening
2. simple and direct story line
3. limited number of characters
4. viewpoint of main character
5. short time span
6. tight writing
7. brief, carefully woven descriptions
8. short chapters
9. lots of dialogue
10. plenty of action scenes
11. short sentences, simple constructions, everyday vocabulary
12. snappy conclusion

Other traits shared are attractive and colorful photographic covers and controlled readability. As an example Sweet Dreams romances are held to a fifth grade reading level (Pollock, 1981). The majority of the other lines are written at a easy reading level also.

The remaining features in the formula are unique to the specific romance series. The girl is the central character in all but two lines. She is between 13 and 16 years old and the story is told from her point of view. One or more boys, one to two years older than the girl are included. They are usually handsome and sensitive. The setting in all but two are contemporary and familiar teen hangouts: school, movie theaters, skating rinks, fast food places, beaches. First love is a favorite focus. The plot moves along by conflicts, such as finding one's own identity, the joy/pain of falling in love, overcoming shyness, and, making hard decisions. These are the misunderstandings and discoveries young girls normally face in their first romantic encounter. Explicit sexual situations, profanity and perversions of any kind are definitely excluded. Dialogue carries the action while the romantic interactions reveal characterization. Normally 40,000 to 50,000 words in length the books end with an inevitable happy conclusion.

Another feature of the teenage romance novel, which may help explain it's success, is the media campaign used to promote it. After all, this phenomenon was created by and then catered to by the publishing companies. The following are examples of the advertising methods used (Pollock, 1981):

1. Grosset & Dunlop's nationwide cover-girl beauty contest.
2. Bantam's Sweet Dream slumber parties, and Sweet Dreams Diary.
3. Silhouette's television commercials aimed at the mothers of the teen audience.
4. Subscription rates for home delivery of the new, monthly titles.
5. Colorful and distinctive displays in chain bookstores, news-stands and drugstores.
6. Magazine ads in Seventeen and other popular magazines for girls.
7. Eye-catching covers depicting attractive girls and boys in beautiful places; some covers even glow.

WHY IS TEEN ROMANTIC FICTION SO POPULAR?

The opinions explaining the popularity of teen romance books are just as prolific as the series themselves. Smith (1981) considers the trend a reaction to the "problem novel" describing broken homes, premarital sex, abortion, drug and alcohol abuse. Bunting (1984) questions whether this "realism" was indeed real for the majority of adolescents. She believes the "problem novels" are not as viable now as they were before.

Helen Cavenagh (1981), author of nine teen romances, agrees. She believes that teenagers want books that make them feel good. Books containing characters, settings, and conflicts resembling their own life. Her romances do contain serious problems, but they are handled in a different manner than in the "problem novel". Reader satisfaction comes from the heroine's growth, confidence and happiness which results from her romantic conflict. Giblin (1982) assumes that today's teenagers are using teen romances to escape the more unpleasant realities of present day life. He also believes they reflect the entire country's current conservative mood. Donaldson (1982) suggests that girls are attracted to them out of a wish fulfillment; the wishes to love and be loved. Nilsen and Donelson (1980) conclude that romance novels which portray love without sex are especially appealing to young female readers because these novels present desirable relationships without the responsibilities and complications of sexual involvement.

SHOULD I ALLOW ROMANTIC FICTION IN MY READING PROGRAM?

The resurgence of the teen romance novels has as many adversaries as advocates. Teen romantic fiction has been criticized for the following negative influences (Smith, 1981):

1. it teaches girls that their primary value is their attractiveness to boys;
2. it devalues relationships and encourages competition between girls;

3. it discounts the possibility of non-romantic friendships between boys and girls;
4. it depicts middle-class, white, small-town families as the norm;
5. it portrays adults in stereotypic sex roles.

However, the librarians surveyed by Publisher's Weekly (Smith, 1981) supported teen romance novels. Many librarians did not consider them sexist and they felt the books adequately portray working mothers, single-parent households, and girls with hobbies and career aspirations. Scholastic and Silhouette have plans for books that would feature a boy's point of view and novels with minority protagonists. Dell has already published several stories with a boy as the central character. While many librarians complained about "formula fiction", they noted that these books were bringing into the library teenagers who didn't normally read. Wagner (1982) felt she should provide her clients with whatever they wanted to read. "If a library isn't relevant, it might as well not exist" is her answer to opponents of romance series.

The larger question is really one of balance. Verdic (1981) perceives the teen romances as only one ingredient in a rounded reading program. Books on sports, science fiction, biography, and other literature should be read by young people. Parrish (1983) surveyed the controversy and recommends that teachers do allow students to read romantic fiction in the classroom, for credit or during SSR. She gives the following advice:

> "Accept the fact that some girls love to read them. Discuss the books with them. Let them talk with one another in groups about the books they have read. Guide their discussion by thought-provoking questions. And, most important of all, after reinforcing the reading experience, suggest a few titles which retain a strong romantic element but are a step higher on the literary value ladder. From here, with more teacher guidance and encouragement, the reader can be introduced to some fascinating historical romances."

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH REVEAL?

Until the writers conducted a study in the Spring of 1984, there was absolutely no specific research data available on the topic of teenage romantic fiction. The only exceptions were reading interests surveys like the Book Industry Study Group (1983) which states that girls are more likely to choose romance and love stories, folk and fairy tales, and biographies while boys select comics, books about sports, history, space and the future.

250 junior and senior high school students (grades 8-12) from three schools in the greater Phoenix metropolitan area answered the following questions:

1. How many romance novels have you read this school year (1983-84)?
2. How many total romance books have you read?
3. How long does it take you to read a romance novel?
4. Who tells you about new romance books?
5. Where do you get the new romance books you read?
6. What other kinds of books do you read and enjoy?

The survey allowed for specific answers in questions 1-3 and multiple options in questions 4-6.

Results from this survey were heartening. The first question revealed that 50% of the eighth graders polled had read 1-5 books, while 100% of the ninth graders had read at least five. The tenth graders had read the least: 30% had read at least five books. The anticipated drop in the number of eleventh and twelth graders reading these novels did not occur: 70% of the polled eleventh graders and 55% of the twelth graders had read at least five romance novels. An astonishing 12% of the twelth graders had read in excess of thirty novels this school year.

The yearly figures have to be judged in context. Question 2 revealed that 28% of the eighth and twelth graders had read thirty or more romance novels all together. The ninth graders continued to read the fewest: 50% had read five or fewer. The percentages for both the tenth and eleventh graders hovered around the 45% mark

mark for five or fewer and 35% for ten or fewer books read.

Because of the high interest/low vocabulary features of romantic fiction, it was assumed the students would find reading quick and easy. Such was the finding of the research. Eighth, ninth, eleventh and twelfth graders read the novels in five hours or less. A surprising 25% of the tenth grade readers reported taking 11-15 hours and 33% took 16-29 hours. A check was made with the teachers involved who classified the readers as average in both rate and comprehension. A possible explanation for the length of time is that these students did not estimate their time well.

With the publishers spending so much time, energy, and advertising money on the promotion, the researchers desired to see the impact upon the intended audience. The fourth question was open response and the students were encouraged to indicate as many sources of information about new romance novels as possible. Across grade levels, friends ranked the highest (50%), then mothers and sisters (18-22%), next magazines (17%), and television (8%), with librarians and teachers being the lowest recommendation source (6%).

Since friends do most of the advertising, it was expected they would be the source of new romance books. Question 5 was an open response and the answers confirm that supposition. Eighth and ninth graders (who do not have independent transportation), get their romance novels equally from friends, bookstores, and school libraries. Tenth graders favor drug/grocery stores and the school library. Eleventh graders find their books primarily in the school library. Twelfth graders showed the most diversity: over half got their books from friends and the public library, 37% from bookstores and the school library, with little use of home and drug/grocery stores.

One of the major criticisms of romance novels is the belief that students will read nothing else, if allowed. The last open-ended question revealed that such is not the case. Students who read the romance novels read many other kinds of litera-

ture also. There were, naturally, differences in the reading interests of the ninth through twelfth grades. Mystery ranked highest at 40%, then adventure, non-fiction, science fiction, biographies, horror, fantasy, historical fiction, poetry, and animal stories were last at 8%. It seems that Verdic's (1981) perception is accurate: romance novels are but a part of a student's rounded reading program.

From the results of this study the following conclusions can be made concerning the use of teenage romantic fiction:

1. Teenage romantic fiction is popular with all grade levels.
2. Less than half of the school populations have read them with more eighth graders represented than any other grade level.
3. The books are easily read taking less than five hours to complete.
4. Although the publishers have spent significant monies to promote their products, friends remain the preferred source of information about the new novels.
5. Friends, libraries (school and public) and bookstores generally provide new novels.
6. Those who read romance novels do not make it their steady diet, but explore other genre and read widely from all types of literature.

This study explored most of the research questions posed by Parrish in 1983. However, it did not go beyond the extent and sources of romantic fiction reading. Further research is needed to explain the enormous popularity of this genre. Remaining in an investigation of the reasons adolescents read romantic fiction. But, at least, results of this study can put the fears of parents, teachers and librarians to rest. Teenage romantic fiction is very popular presently, but it is not a threat in supplanting other literature. So, teachers may safely and even, enjoyably, put a little romance into their reading programs!

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PUBLISHERS OF TEEN ROMANCES

BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP'S TEMPO BOOKS, 200 Madison Avenue, New York, NY, 10016.
Caprice Romances deals with first love romances of a 15 or 16 year-old heroine, expressing the restlessness of youth and wonder of falling in love. $1.95.

BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS, 6820 Auto Club Road, Minneapolis, MN, 55438
Heartsong Romances are inspirational teen romances for 15 to 18 year-old readers, dealing with one main Christian lesson as well as adventure and mystery. $2.25.

Springflower Romances for the younger teenaged reader, 13 to 16, Rhapsody heroines are college-age or slightly order.

BALLANTINE BOOKS, Fawcett Books, 1515 Broadway, New York City, NY, 10036.
Juniper books include strong subplots in addition to romance. $1.75 to $2.25.

CLOVERDALE PRESS, 133 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10036.
Sweet Dreams treats important adolescent conflicts through character development and personal growth, for 10 to 15 year-olds. $1.95.

DELL PUBLISHING, Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, New York, NY, 10017.
Young Love is actually a repromotion of books from the popular Laurel Leaf young adult line which contain a strong element of romance. Because of this the books are not written to formula. Many are titles by Majorie Holmes. $1.95.

E. P. DUTTON, INC., 1 Park Avenue, New York, NY, 10016.
Heavenly Romances revolve around day-to-day problems, concerns, fears and joys of first or early romantic experiences. Written for 12 to 16 years-old.

NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY, 1633 Broadway, New York, NY, 10019.
Signet Vista focus on the development of a love relationship between a high school-aged girl and boy. Written for the pre-teen/teen reader. $2.50.

PITMAN LEARNING, INC., 19 Davis Drive, Belmont, CA 94002.
Fastback Romance, teen titles designed in their high interest/low vocabulary line for remedial readers at the 2nd-3rd grade level.

POCKET BOOKS, Archway Paperbacks, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.
Follow Your Heart Romances contain multiple options for story development and ending of contemporary and realistic light romances. Written for girls in the 5th to 7th grade. $1.95.

Moonstone novels combine adolescent romance with the intrigue of modern-day mystery and suspense. Grades 5 and up.

RIVERVIEW BOOKS INC., Warner Books, 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10003.
Two by Two Romance includes actually two novels: one written from the heroine's view, and the same romance written from the hero's point of view. The book needs only to be flipped upside down to change sides. $2.25.

Make Your Dreams Come True is a multiple-plot romance novel where the reader chooses the story development.

SCHOLASTIC BOOK SERVICES, 50 W. 44th Street, New York, NY, 10036.

Wildfire Romances are contemporary romances for girls 12 to 15 years old which deal with problems of their first or early love relationships. $1.95.

Wishing Star includes stories of heartbreak, hope and love with a more serious flavor than Wildfire. $1.95.

Windswept Romances are atmospheric, gothic type, contemporary mystery/adventures for the 12 to 15 year olds. $1.95.

SILHOUETTE BOOKS, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY, 10020.

First Love deals exclusively with the heroine's first romantic encounter, frequently including the problem of achieving a balance between her aspirations and her achievements. Written for 11 to 16 year old readers. $1.75.

SIMON AND SCHUSTER'S Wanderer Books, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY, 10020.

Dream Your Own Romances are stories with a multiple plot endings in trade digest form for the 8 to 12 year-old readers.

TSR, INC., P.O. Box 756, Lake Geneva, WI, 53147.

Heart Quest Books have a medieval setting and fantasy adventure-romance flavor in addition to "picking the path" with multiple options. Attractive to 11 to 14 year old readers.